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Foucault on painting

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Abstract
Michel Foucault's understanding of painting oriented him and his readers to an alternative history of art through a means or an approach well known to philosophers and literary critics, that of irony. A close reading of the first chapter of *The Order of Things* shows that Foucault rejected the traditional interpretations of art history generated by a focus on the intentions of the individual artist, the identification of the subjects portrayed, and the expectations of a genre, relying instead on a synthesis of the approaches to painting given by Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan, which converged with his ironic approach.

Keywords
anamorphosis, Michel Foucault, irony, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, painting

> *Je dois dire que je n'ai jamais tellement aimé l'écriture. Il y a la matérialité qui me fascine dans la peinture.* [I must say that I never really liked writing. It is the materiality of painting that fascinates me.] (Foucault, 1994: 707; author's translation)

Near the end of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in 1969, Foucault asked whether one could 'conceive of an archaeological analysis that would reveal the regularity of a body of knowledge, but which would not set out to analyse it in terms of epistemological figures and sciences?' (Foucault, 1972: 192). Answering himself in the affirmative, Foucault provided three other possible 'orientations' to the episteme: the archaeological descriptions of sexuality (hence the later books on the history of sexuality), of painting, and of political knowledge (the subject of much of Foucault's last writing and lectures) (ibid.: 193–4). Although not pursued in his later work in the way sexuality and politics were, the topic of painting is significant to Foucault's conception

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of knowledge and specific to it. Rather than painting, Foucault could have nominated any other particular medium of the visual arts, such as sculpture or photography, or, indeed, the general category of 'art' or the visual arts. He could have focused on 'the image', as many contemporary interpreters of visual culture have claimed he did.[1] He did none of these, or at least not with the assiduousness with which he pursued painting over the course of a decade. According to Foucault, painting must be judged and appreciated on its own terms: in terms of its materiality, as indicated in the quotation above taken from an interview of 1975, or in terms of what I will call here the pictorial techniques and characteristics specific to it, such as color, spatial considerations and framing. For Foucault, painting would also need to be judged historically, as a material practice of the early modern and modern eras.

Foucault argued that an archaeology of painting would demonstrate that 'it is discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effects', and, as such, that painting possesses what Foucault called 'the positivity of knowledge itself (*savoir*)' (Foucault, 1972: 194). At the time he wrote *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault's attraction to painting as an alternative kind of discourse, one that could manifest what writing and other discourses could not in regard to both ontology (being) and epistemology (knowing), had already emerged in his book *Les Mots et les Choses* of 1966, known in English as *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1970[1966]). The first chapter of this book contained an extended analysis of the painting known as *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). By virtue of the canonical status of *this* painting and *this* artist in the history of European art, many commentators have considered Foucault's chapter on *Las Meninas* seriously. However, the significance of this writing as the first single piece of writing devoted to painting in an approximately 10 years' attempt at an account of painting and its relation to knowledge, or to the question of how visual language means, has not been explored until recently (see Soussloff, 2009: 734–54).[2] In this article I will not attempt a defense for a coherent approach to painting on the part of Foucault, but rather I set out the theoretical terms upon which Foucault began his exploration of painting.

What did Foucault intend when he called painting *savoir* and what are the outcomes of a method that understands painting in this way? For Foucault painting is a different discursive practice, embodied by the techniques and the effects of the painted representation, and with a theoretical shape unlike the sciences and philosophy. Foucault wrote: 'In this sense, the painting is not a pure vision that must be transcribed into the materiality of space; nor is it a naked gesture whose silent and eternally empty meanings must be freed from subsequent interpretations. It is shot through – and independently of scientific knowledge (*connaissance*) and philosophical theme – with the positivity of a knowledge (*savoir*)' (Foucault, 1972: 194). Given painting as a kind of knowledge (*savoir*) that is neither produced nor acquired by the sciences, it must involve our understanding (*connaissance*) of what makes such acquisition possible and what determines that that may be acquired through it. With the archaeology of painting it is hard to imagine a more important or audacious challenge to the history of art, one analogous to establishing the stakes of narrative in and for literature.[3]

According to Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the archaeology of painting would not be centered on the artist and the 'murmur of his intentions … transcribed … into lines, surfaces, and colors' (ibid.: 193). Thus, the archaeology of painting rejects the long-standing centrality in the history of art of the artist's personality and style, as a

primary means of understanding the significance of painting.[4] To reject the artist's personality and style, however, does not mean that Foucault negated the importance of what any individual artist had contributed to the understanding of painting through his or her paintings. Indeed, four of Foucault's five essays on painting comprehensively examined the works of single, major European painters – the French realist and Impressionist, Edouard Manet (1832–83); the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967); and Foucault's contemporaries Paul Rebeyrolle (1926–2005) and Gérard Fromanger (1939–).[5] One might say that Foucault approached the issue of painting with the painter, rather than through the painter. In this he followed the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wrote:

> If one shuts up art in the secret reaches of the individual, one can explain the convergence of independent works only by some destiny which rules over them. But when, on the contrary, one puts painting back into the presence of the world, as we are trying to do, what becomes of Painting in itself or of the spirit of Painting? (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 76)[6]

From the beginning of his study of painting in *The Order of Things* Foucault sought to encounter canonical painting on its own and in new terms. In the chapter on *Las Meninas* he accomplished this initially through the deferral of the identification of the figures that are portrayed: the painter standing at his canvas and the subjects of the painting, i.e. the king and queen reflected in the mirror on the wall at the back of the room and the figures of the Infanta and her entourage in the front of the space depicted. The first sentence of the chapter refused the identification of the artist: 'The painter is standing a little back from his canvas' (Foucault, 1970: 3). Who is this unnamed painter? It is not in the interest of the archaeology of knowledge to provide an answer to this question, quite the opposite. We are with the artist; we do not see the painting *through* him. In what follows here I will explore the meaning of painting for Foucault through a close reading of his approach to it in *The Order of Things*.

The first four pages of the chapter focus on the idea of visibility, its pictorial inverse, invisibility, and the required pictorial corollary to their depiction, light. Without naming a single figure in the canvas in these pages Foucault frees the group portrait (in which the self-portrait of the artist also appears) both from the imposition of the proper name and from our expectations of the genre of portraiture itself.[7] In the common art-historical reading of portraits the proper name semiotically designates the first or primary meaning of the painting, e.g. its sitter(s).[8] At the beginning of the 15th century the architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti justified the 'divine power' of painting on the grounds that it makes 'the absent present', and because 'it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure' (Alberti, 2004: 60). Foucault's approach to *Las Meninas* overturned this normative understanding of the act of recognition that makes painting divine and by which pleasure is given through it. For Foucault, naming impeded seeing because in its ostentatious referentiality it prevents vision:

> 'But if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names and preserve the infinity of the task' (Foucault, 1970: 9–10).

Foucault's way of reading a masterpiece and a portrait contradicted the conventions of the discipline of art history. In the lecture on Manet of a few years later he humbly reports: 'I would also like to excuse myself for talking about Manet because, of course, I am not a Manet specialist; nor am I a painting specialist, so it is as a layman that I would speak to you about Manet' (Foucault, 2009: 27). In the masterpiece, the name of the artist traditionally functioned as a guarantor of the work's artistic and economic value. Without the master, the masterpiece quite literally was just another painting. Foucault disingenuously implied here that without the art historian, the master and the masterpiece cannot be art history. Clearly, then, they must be something else. Similarly, in the portrait the names of those portrayed functioned as linguistic 'pointers' to the identities of the sitters and their social context. In writing on *Las Meninas* Foucault explained the problem of the name in this way:

> 'And the proper name, in this particular context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as though they were equivalents' (ibid.: 9).

Even as the identification of the artist portrayed as 'Velázquez' does not occur until the bottom of the fourth page, the artist's representation of the figures in the mirror at the back of the wall became the object of Foucault's analysis:

> In this strange light, two silhouettes are apparent, while above them, and a little behind them, is a heavy purple curtain. The other pictures reveal little more than a few paler patches buried in a darkness without depth. This particular one, on the other hand, opens onto a perspective of space in which recognizable forms recede from us in a light that belongs only to itself. Among all these elements intended to provide representations, while impeding them, hiding them, concealing them because of their position or their distance from us, this is the only one that fulfils its function in all honesty and enables us to see what it is supposed to show. (ibid.: 6)

Although recognized as portraits, these figures of the king and queen of Spain too are not specifically named until later in the essay. Even then Foucault claimed: 'We must therefore pretend not to know who is to be reflected in the depths of that mirror, and interrogate that reflection in its own terms' (ibid.: 10). The pictorial element of 'a light that belongs only to itself', rather than the subjects of the reflection in the mirror on the wall, interested Foucault. As he went on to explain: 'Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible [to us]; but no one [in the painting] is looking at it' (ibid.: 7).

Given Foucault's focus in his essays on painting on particular paintings by particular artists, it may be said that they provided the actual and material points of contact, or sedimentations, of what could not be seen elsewhere or explained using other means. As I have briefly demonstrated in my example here, Foucault's analysis of the pictorial or visual elements in paintings came about as a result of rejecting both the more conventional disciplinary methods used to interpret paintings and the accepted ways of

understanding the genres, such as portraiture, of painting. Foucault found his new method through the rigorous application of an acute visual sensitivity to the pictorial aspects of painting, but this new approach could not have been achieved without a profound knowledge of the history and theory of art from the Renaissance to his own day. The existence of the three other essays on painting bears out this claim, as do certain aspects of Foucault's own biography about which I have written elsewhere.[9] However, the specific nature of Foucault's relationship to the history of art as it appears in philosophy warrants examination here because it bears directly on the contribution that he made towards an understanding of painting as a singular means of examining the episteme.

I contend that Foucault's understanding of painting oriented him and his readers to what might be now called an alternative history of art, through a means or an approach well known to philosophers and literary critics, that of irony. We have seen in the first pages of *The Order of Things* that this new approach to painting rejected the traditional interpretations of art history generated by a focus on the intentions of the individual artist, the identification of the subjects portrayed, and the expectations of a genre. An alternative approach to painting had already been offered by A. W. Schlegel, who, in the early 19th century, called this way of writing about art *rhapsodic*. He denigrated Winckelmann, Diderot, Hogarth and others in favor of the approach to beauty and the sublime offered by Kant.[10] According to Schlegel, Kant's philosophy of art offered 'the immediate appearance of the infinite in the finite' (Schlegel, 1830: 13). Echoes of this specific predilection for Kant can be discerned in Merleau-Ponty's 'what becomes of Painting in itself or of the spirit of Painting?', quoted above, and, as we shall see, in the expressed aims of Foucault's archaeology of painting.

Throughout the first chapter of *The Order of Things* it is obvious that the spectator's point of view in regard to the painting has prominence for the account, precisely because he maintains a distance from both the artist and the subject matter of the work, while at the same time recognizing its material properties. This distancing of the viewer from the work of art recalls the aesthetic effects offered by irony according to Schlegel (Schlegel, 1914). Foucault termed the canvas depicted at the front of the composition and on which the artist in the painting paints, 'ironic' (Foucault, 1970: 7). By so doing he situated it and the very idea of oil painting, which it represents, at a distance from the viewer. With this detachment he signaled that other things may be seen or known through painting than what it names or represents. For, the large vertical canvas in *Las Meninas* dominates the entire left side of the painting but it cannot be apprehended by the viewer except from its reverse side, with stretchers and bare canvas – its materiality, so to speak – exposed to view. By exposing the frame and the framing, Foucault thinks that painting can be better apprehended, e.g. 'A strangely literal, though inverted, application of the advice given, so it is said to his pupil [Velázquez] by the old Pachero when the former was working in his studio in Seville: "The image should stand out from the frame"' (ibid.: 8). The depicted canvas and its ostensible subject have been denied to view, thereby fulfilling a common definition of irony as that which conceals rather than shows.[11] It is in this sense, as Foucault intimates in his essay, that the recto of the painting itself is 'dishonest', unlike the mirror in the background, which is honest in its reference to the light necessary to visibility.

However, the concealment of the representation creates an incongruity between what the characters depicted in the painting see and what the viewer of the painting knows

about it or, even, expects in relationship to what is depicted. Foucault begins his essay with 'The painter [who] is standing a little back from his canvas' in order to underline that what is apparently known through painting, the viewer 'knows' only as a result of his or her ironic position towards it (ibid.: 3).

Foucault's approach to this canvas as ironic, perhaps also referenced his earlier work on madness. He related the verso side of the canvas to 'The other side of a psyche' (ibid.: 6). Like the unconscious, it functions in the painting as a whole as 'the double that until now has been denied us' (ibid.: 7). The unconscious is a place normally concealed to us – or invisible – but without which, according to Freud, we cannot understand reality.[12] For Foucault, the material reality of the painting cannot be comprehended fully without seeing what is usually concealed when the *tableau* is on the wall or when it is pictured, i.e. the back of the canvas and its stretchers. Foucault's approach to a painting as 'the other side of a psyche' further suggests his familiarity with Jacques Lacan's concept and use of *anamorphosis*; a visual technique or strategy of representation perfected in the era that Velázquez painted *Las Meninas*.[13] In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, seminar XI of 1964, Lacan used paintings to exemplify the bipolar action of '*I see myself seeing myself*' [*je me vois me voir*] which he understood to be 'the privilege of the subject' (Lacan, 1978: 81 [1973: 94]; original emphases).[14] These words echo in Foucault's text:

> The light, by flooding the scene (I mean the room as well as the canvas, the room represented on the canvas, and the room in which the canvas stands), envelops the figures and the spectators and carries them with it, under the painter's gaze, concealed from us. We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lusterless back. The other side of a psyche. (Foucault, 1970: 6)

The most original aspect of Lacan's view of anamorphosis, and the one that Foucault drew upon in his understanding of the irony of the canvas in *Las Meninas*, lies in its psychoanalytic purpose. Anamorphosis plays an exemplary role in Lacan's idea of perception because it reveals 'how, in the perspective of the unconscious, we can situate consciousness' (Lacan, 1973: 92 [1978: 79]). Lacan opposed anamorphosis (which he would establish as the view from the unconscious) to phenomenological viewing (which he equated with the operation of consciousness). Lacan's use of anamorphosis in paintings did not so much function to reject a phenomenological method of the analysis of art, as some have erroneously supposed, as it did to bolster it with another angle of support for understanding how we see. With actual, visual anamorphoses as his evidence, i.e. paintings by Holbein, Archimboldo, Dali and others, Lacan had argued against the view 'that perception is not in me, that it is with the objects that perception apprehends' (ibid.: 94). In this we can see that both Lacan and Foucault used methods that denied the primacy of the art object – both its subject matter and its artist – and that had tethered art history to it.[15] For Lacan, anamorphosis established the privilege of every viewing subject over the perspective from the object. He explained: 'The privilege of the subject seemed to be established here with this reflexive and bipolar relation, that does no more

than, as long as I see, show me my representations appearing to myself' (ibid.: 94). So too, in the reverse side of the representation in *Las Meninas*, which is both its invisibility and the back of the object, or painting, interpreted by art history, Foucault established a reflexive position for understanding the relationship of the viewer to painting in the Classical age, as he put it. To interpret what is not seen might be called the hermeneutical opposite of the most commonly used methods of art history. In his essays on painting, Foucault the philosopher-art historian moves back and forth between what is represented and what is not represented in order to present the significance of painting as a system of knowledge.

In the conclusion of his essay 'The Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', and in the unfinished and posthumously published book, *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty asked the essential question: If painting is not language, what is it? Foucault appropriated the title 'The Prose of the World' as the second chapter of *The Order of Things*, following the chapter entitled '*Las Meninas*'. Foucault's analysis of Classical painting precedes the analysis of representation and resemblance in language found in the rest of the book and made possible by comparison with it.[16] Foucault's exact contemporary in France, the art historian Hubert Damisch, followed the essential question asked by his teacher Merleau-Ponty in another manner: by exploring in his first book the thing that intervenes, that both forms an equivalency and separates the above and the below in painting, i.e. the cloud (Damisch, 2002[1972]). Here the titles of the chapters of the cloud book reveal the outlines of the answer to the essential question, If painting is not language, what is it?: 'Sign and Symbol'; 'Sign and Representation'; 'Syntactical Space'; 'The Powers of the Continuum'.

I raise the case of the writing on painting by Hubert Damisch in order to suggest the historical specificity of the interest that Foucault exhibited in his essays on painting. Both philosopher and art historian looked at painting from another point of view than the Germanically inflected art history of the 1960s and 1970s in the Anglo-American context could, precisely because they began with the philosophical consideration given to it by Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan. My analysis of Foucault's first extended writing on painting allows us to link Foucault's concerns not only with those of his French intellectual contemporaries, but also with his own critiques of the subject and the author, which would follow. An understanding of this French historiography of Foucault's theory on painting may lead us to resituate the relationship between the practice of art and philosophy in the Anglo-American context since the middle of the 20th century. It might also lead us back towards the appreciation of what painting might have to offer to the history of art today.

Notes

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1. A good survey of the misguided approaches to Foucault's interest in painting as image, which at times has been further elaborated as 'visuality', may be found in Rose (2001: 135–86).
2. See my essay making the case that Foucault attempted a coherent account of painting, including the specifics of what that account consisted of (Soussloff, 2009). See now also Tanke (2009) and Barr (2007). For an examination of these essays in regard to the issue of vision, see Shapiro (2003).
3. See, for example, Bal (1997).
4. On the meaning of the artist for the historiography of art history, see Soussloff (1997). For comments on Foucault's approach to the author/artist issue, see ibid.: 108–11.
5. For the essay or lecture on Manet, see Saison (2004) and Foucault (2009). For the essay on Magritte, see Foucault (1982). For the essay on Fromanger, see Foucault (1999: 83–104). The essay on Rebeyrolle has not yet been translated; see Foucault (1973).
6. This book was left unfinished at the author's death. The chapter I am quoting from here is called 'The Indirect Language', also contained in the title of Merleau-Ponty's famous essay on painting, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', first published in a two-part installment in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952 and subsequently as one essay in the book called *Signes* in 1960 (Merleau-Ponty, 1960). A translation of this work appeared in 1964 (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). On this chronology see Johnson (1993: 14–15).
7. See my discussion of the concept of the name of the artist in regard to its importance for the history of art (Soussloff, 2008: 83–99).
8. I have examined the genre of portraiture and the concept of the portrait in Soussloff (2006). See that book for the extensive art-historical literature on portraiture, which continues to grow at a rapid rate.
9. See Soussloff (2009: 735–6).
10. See Schlegel (1830). I use here the French translation of the German text in order to gain the texture of the terminology in French found in Foucault's writing. All translations of this text are mine.
11. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 448.
12. See Laplanche and Pontalis (1976[1967]: 363): 'When Freud speaks of psychical reality he is not simply referring to the proper field of psychology, conceived as having its own order of reality and as being open to scientific investigation: he means everything in the psyche that takes on the force of reality for the subject.'
13. The literature in art history on anamorphosis is by now quite large; see Massey (2007). I have found particularly valuable for this essay the discussion in Snyder (2010).
14. This is the way the all-important mirror at the center of the painting functions in *Las Meninas*, according to Foucault: 'The mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation; it allows us to see, in the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly visible' (Foucault, 1970: 8). Compare this with Zizek (1997: 75): 'the procedure that allows us to discern the structural inconsistency of an ideological edifice is that of the anamorphic reading'.
15. Yves-Alain Bois has argued that an aesthetic of mimesis lies at the heart of 'Sartre's thesis that there is no such thing as aesthetic perception, the aesthetic object being something "unreal", apprehended by the "imaging consciousness"', and that this is an anti-perceptual model of painting; see Bois (1986: 126–7). Bois places Hubert Damisch's writing on painting against the Sartrean view. I would also locate Foucault there. Both Damisch and Foucault knew Merleau-

Ponty's work on painting, and each proceeded in his own way to grapple with it in their writing of the 1970s. I will further explore these issues in my forthcoming book on Foucault and painting.

16. Given the importance of 'the Classic age' to Foucault's analysis of the painting of *Las Meninas* and to the history of art, it is perhaps useful here to remind ourselves of what his source, Merleau-Ponty, intended by it: 'Later, both [art and poetry] know a classic age which is the secularization of the sacred age; art is then the representation of a Nature that it can at best embellish – but according to formulas taught to it by Nature herself. As La Bruyère would have it, speech has no other role than finding the exact expression assigned in advance to each thought by a language of things themselves; and this double recourse to an art before art, to a speech before speech, prescribes to the work a certain point of perfection, completeness, or fullness which makes all human beings assent to it as they assent to the things which fall under their senses' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964[1952]: 84). Compare with Foucault (1970: 16):

> 'Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velàzquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being ... and representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.'

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